

ABOUT MUSIC – By Mariss McTucker

Tahj: *Sweatshop Sneakers* Recorded at Club Shmed Studio and Paradigm Shift Studios, Missoula, MT, and at BellTone Studios, Los Angeles; mixed and mastered by Max Allyn, 2014.

Missoula songwriter Tahj Bo Kjelland grew up around family musicians, so he easily gravitated toward performing. On this second album he expresses himself on hip-hop pieces with reggae and R&B influences. All are self-penned except the chorus to “Lulu Love.”

Kjelland plays bass and is accompanied by a cadre of other instrumentalists: Sam Ore and Yabba Griffiths, guitar; Ryan Means, keys; Kyle Gillet, trombone; Dylan Dwyer, alto sax; Mike Hamling, trumpet; and Brandon Zimmer and Ras Congo, drums. Margi Cates, Penelope Baquero, and Diego Kjelland all add vocals.

Kjelland starts off the short “Mountain Skies” playing haunting flute; the tune then morphs into a gospel-flavored call-and-response with a crowd. “Alchemy” has a struttin’ tempo with a cool horn section bubbling underneath, and a torrent of lyrics.

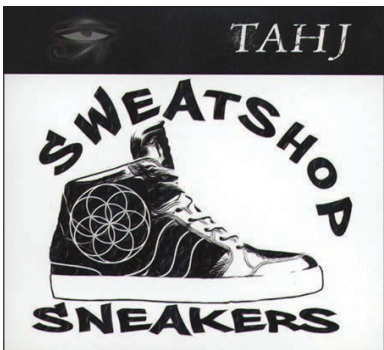
Fuzzed-out vocal effects, loads of reverb, and island ambience infuse the gentle “Stop Drop and Roll.” Kjelland, seemingly channeling Bob Marley, has a versatile baritone that moves all around the verses.

“44 Degrees” has a nice chord progression and rapid-fire lyrics (“When you get a chance why don’t you give a little bit of energy for the people to dance”).

The most unusual piece is “I Cry Str8.” At just under a minute long, it’s got a cool drumbeat and mantra-like mm-mmms underneath the words. Kjelland voices a hypnotic, repeated “I cry, I cry, oh baby, I cry,” that follows lines such as “... tears for the ones unjustly in chains ...”

This song is an example of Kjelland’s musical mission to speak out against oppression in all its forms, and its simplicity brings home the message. You’ll dance when you turn up this recording.

Find out more about the artist on Facebook.



Bill Mize: *The Back of Beyond*

Recorded by Bill Mize at Alien-Mojo Studios, Pittman Center, TN; mixed and mastered by Neal Merrick Blackwood, Nashville, TN; produced by Bill Mize, 2014.

Grammy-winning fingerstyle guitarist and Missoula resident Bill Mize gives us 10 tunes on this, his sixth album, nine of which he wrote.

His wife, musician Beth Bramhall, plays accordion.

The Tennessee native, a past winner of the elite Winfield, Kansas national guitar competition, has been pickin’ since he was almost a toddler. When he saw Elvis on TV at the age of 3 or 4, he knew then music was going to be his life’s calling.

Save for Astor Piazzolla’s “Milonga del Angel,” with its soft and sweet Parisian ambience (thanks in part to Bramhall’s accordion stylings), Mize believes this recording evokes more of the flavor of the mountain music he was raised on than past efforts.

“Joe Pye Jig” has a folk-song elegance, rippling with an old-time sound. “Every Dog Has His Day” brandishes a relaxing waltz feel, and “The Captain’s Friend” percolates with a country-blues nuance, percussively snapping its way through a dissonant melody. Mize’s unmistakable approach and brilliant tone are in fine form here.

The title tune, “The Back of Beyond,” has a silky melody, replete with harmonic pings and a light touch. The sound of crickets introduces the hypnotic “A Child of God,” and “Call Pick” simply rocks.

Consummate fretwork, rolling and expressive, peppers the crisp and jazzy “Romancing the Tone.” It’s one of Mize’s old flat-picking tunes that he decided to play as a fingerstyle number. Cool song title, yes?

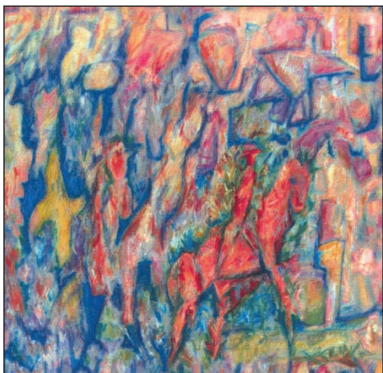
Mize’s nimble proficiency, so effortless and melodic, is something we take for granted until we start to wonder how the heck he does that. No matter. Just enjoy. Visit www.billmize.com.



Doug Wendt: *Ghost Town Sound* Recorded at Bongo Boy Studio, McKinleyville, CA, Hollow Bone Studio, Rexburg, ID, Tuff Gong Studios, Kingston, Jamaica, and studios in London; co-produced by Doug Wendt and Jimmy Foot, 2014.

Black Eagle multi-media artist and University of Great Falls art instructor Doug Wendt and his band have released their first recording. It melds native legends, Montana landscapes, and spooky lyrics, set to a funky island beat.

Wendt is joined here by long-time cohorts Jimmy Foot, guitar/keys, Doug Sternberg, bass and native flute, Steven Powell, drums and jaw harp, and Marc Wendt, guitar. Wendt provides guitar, percussion and main vocals, while most of his sidekicks, including Cat Wendt, supply background vocals. Many other musicians contribute, too.



Wendt wrote or co-wrote more than half the songs, and his spectral interpretations stir the dust of forlorn and long-deserted western towns. But his vision goes beyond geographical boundaries, encompassing a world threatening to disappear like the barren towns, nay, civilizations of yore, due to humanity’s excesses.

Wendt’s throaty gravel-bed baritone almost whispers the story-songs. Echos and wolf sounds introduce “Ohtahku,” about the great falls of the Missouri. Wendt extols the magical, ethereal “ghost town sound” of the falls, long-silenced by a dam, yet reincarnated through music.

Native singing and a palpitating drumbeat introduce Sherman Alexie’s creation poem, “Crow Testament.” Wendt speaks the words over a Jamaican rock track. His “Auditor” has a stark, apocalyptic ambience married to a perky cadence; a throbbing tempo and sustained guitar riff punctuate this tale of Butte’s toxic Berkeley Pit.

Wendt weaves Leonard Cohen’s “Fingerprints” into Stan Jones’s melody, “Ghost Riders in the Sky,” to shuffly comic effect; and Neil Young’s “Boxcar” gets a syncopated and thunky train-track treatment as Wendt sings in hushed tones.

This album is definitely ghostly, and definitely different. Visit www.ghost-townsound.com.

MudSlide Charley: *New and Used*

Recorded by Ryan Maynes at Club Shmed Studio, Missoula, MT; produced by MudSlide Charley, 2014.

These Missoula bluesmeisters have a third recording on the streets. When you listen to these guys, you get to the marrow of the Delta blues. It’s visceral and rough-hewn, yet polished at the same time – accomplished, in part, by superb production.

We’ve got Missoula blues icon Phil Hamilton, harmonicas, saxophones, and percussion; Marco Littig, guitar; Emi Kodama, percussion; Tahj Kjelland, bass; and Roger Moquin, drums and percussion. Everyone contributes vocals, and Kodama and Littig burn up the soundwaves with their lead singing. The band collaborated on the songwriting, except for one cover.

“One Step Ahead of the Blues” opens with dirge-y, amped-up guitar and trembling harmonica; forthwith, Kodama proceeds to torch the lyrics. She possesses a fine instrument, pretty and malleable.

Littig growls his way through “Why Baby Why,” sharing lead vocals with Kodama, as honkin’ sax joins the guitar in a cool riff. The rockin’ “Sweet Nostalgia” possesses a New Orleans R&B flair; Kodama belts it out as backing vocalists answer her with a soulful “Don’t keep me waitin’ on you.”

“When the Bottom Drops Out” has a wicked guitar vibe and a sexy, rock-steady beat. How about “Ice Water”? Littig’s raucous, smoldering pipes combine Bob Dylan and Tom Waits nuances, set to muscular harmonica and a struttin’ drumbeat.

You’ll emancipate your hips to J. B. Lenoir’s “Feeling Good,” a finger-poppin’ snapper replete with Littig’s bottleneck slide guitar, a cappella singing, and some solo bass and drum work. Moquin and Kodama trade lead vocals on this cover piece.

“Living for Another Day” is a bit spooky; Kjelland embellishes it with some of his signature rap lyrics. Their liner notes describe them as playing in such a way as to “make the limbs feel looser.” And it’s true: these folks will definitely get you movin’.

Vist the group at www.reverbnation.com/mudslidecharley.



Jacob Robert Stephens: *The Sun Beyond the Storm*

Engineered by Ryan “Shmed” Maynes at Club Shmed Studio in Missoula, MT, and Chris Malmberg at MO Studios, Fairbanks, AK; produced by Jacob Robert Stephens, 2014.

Singer/songwriter Jacob Robert Stephens, who splits his time between Troy and Missoula, continues to cast his poetic eye on the character and temperament of those living a hardscrabble rural life. His second album, with eight originals and two covers, follows 2012’s *Here Comes Hindsight*.

The troubadour grew up in northwest Montana and spent several years in Alaska, so weather plays prevalently as a metaphor in his folk poems. His figures endure chilly sunsets and cold lonely nights, and nurse broken hearts poked to bleeding by remembering old love affairs. The wistful story-songs are perfectly suited to his sandy baritone, and he unravels his tales over pretty melodies.

As usual, Stephens plays gobs of instruments here: guitars, mandolin, harmonica, ukulele, and drums. He has ample help from compadres Ryan Maynes, piano, drums, accordion and bass; Gibson Hartwell, pedal steel; Grace Decker, fiddle; Andy Dunnigan, Dobro; Jacob David Hurley, upright bass; and Roger Moquin on drums. Stephens sings harmony to many of his own leads, and gets vocal accompaniment from Brooke Sheridan and Jared Betz as well.

“Circles” is a good slow dancer. Sheridan shares lead vocals on “The Auction,” a glum yet melodic tale of a couple taking the final step before separation – splitting up their possessions.

“The Place Between” is an uplifting barnburner with sawin’ fiddle and wacky, wiggly Dobro. “What in the world am I to do, weekends ain’t enough for lovin’ you ... where’s the place in between?”

“Carousel” is a love-struck duet, a ballad with a pretty ’60s chord progression and cool vocal interplay between Sheridan and Stephens.

This guy is adept at writing good songs in country and folk styles, and has the chops to pull it off. You can find him on Facebook.



State of the Arts welcomes CDs

State of the Arts welcomes CD submissions by Montana musicians for inclusion in the About Music section. The recordings must be professional, commercially available, full-length CDs, with cover art and liner notes. Brief biographical information on band members would be helpful to the writer.

Please send submissions to either the Montana Arts Council, PO Box 202201, Helena, MT, 59620; or *Lively Times*, 33651 Eagle Pass Trl., Charlo, MT 59824.